

TO CASE STUDY OR NOT TO CASE STUDY: OUR EXPERIENCE WITH THE CANADIAN GOVERNMENT'S EVALUATION PRACTICES AND THE USE OF CASE STUDIES AS AN EVALUATION METHODOLOGY FOR FIRST NATIONS PROGRAMS

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Abstract: Canadian policy decision-making has utilized case studies extensively in recent years. Johnston Research Inc. (JRI) has completed more evaluation-related case studies over the past 4 years than in the previous 15 years of our evaluation work. To understand the growing application of case studies, we interviewed clients and contacts from First Nations that had been case study sites for our government clients, to understand what aspects of case study evaluation research had helped them share their opinions and improve their programs, and what aspects had not. We then interviewed our government clients, asking how well case studies served their evaluation purposes and their programs or policy development efforts. JRI conducted and financed this study to help us improve our own approaches for conducting case studies in Aboriginal populations and to share these findings with others. This article presents our interview findings on the value of case studies for Aboriginal evaluation projects and shares some best practices for conducting case studies within, and with, First Nations. Finally, we explore the impact case studies have had on Canadian policy.

Résumé : L'établissement de politiques et la prise de décision au Canada s'est appuyé largement sur les études de cas dans les années récentes. À Johnston Research inc. (JRI), nous avons réalisé plus d'études de cas liées à l'évaluation dans les 4 dernières années qu'en 15 ans d'activité précédente dans le domaine. Afin d'expliquer l'augmentation récente, nous avons interrogé des clients et des représentants des Premières Nations faisant l'objet d'études de cas par nos clients gouvernementaux et leur avons demandé de préciser les aspects qui leur avaient permis, ou non, d'exprimer leur opinion et d'améliorer leurs programmes.

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Nous avons ensuite interrogé nos clients gouvernementaux afin de savoir dans quelle mesure ces études répondent à leurs objectifs d'évaluation et d'élaboration de programmes ou de politiques. JRI a effectué et financé cette étude qui nous a permis d'améliorer nos processus de réalisation d'études de cas liées aux peuples autochtones et de partager nos résultats. Cet article présente les résultats des entrevues et permet de déterminer l'importance des études de cas dans le cadre de projets d'évaluation concernant les peuples autochtones, fournissant des pratiques exemplaires dans la conduite d'études de cas au sein de, et en partenariat avec, les Nations Premières. Enfin, on aborde l'incidence de ces études de cas sur les politiques canadiennes.

INTRODUCTION

Case studies bring an evaluation to life. They can resonate for both case study participants on the ground as well as for senior management and decision makers. (Evaluation Director, Federal Government)

In the past six years, Johnston Research Inc. (JRI) undertook 30 Aboriginal evaluation projects that were case studies. Fifteen of these evaluation projects were specific to Ontario, while 12 projects included case studies in every province and territory across Canada. The number of case study sites per project ranged from 2 to 25. The projects investigated a wide variety of programs and initiatives, including health, mental wellness, social welfare, social justice, and education programs (see Table 1). Twelve case study evaluations were carried out in the last two years alone.

In order to better understand how our evaluations were being used by clients and community stakeholders, we began a process of collecting feedback from all First Nations case study sites we had visited over the year preceding this study. We also spoke to federal government contacts through a snowball sample of former clients from the year preceding this study and new contacts, to whom our clients referred us, who had managed an Aboriginal case study. We asked our respondents how the results of case studies in general (and our case studies specifically) were being applied to their programming, as well as their perceptions of the utility of case studies in influencing policy. The purpose of these interviews was threefold. First, our research could lend credibility to the use of case studies as an evaluation tool. Next, this feedback would also enable us to learn some best practices

of conducting case studies in Aboriginal populations. Finally, examples of case studies influencing policy would address questions and doubts of our First Nation partners about how, and whether, their participation in government-funded case study research contributes to policy change. As a company that practices and advocates for balanced or mixed methods approaches to research, we also reviewed the literature to examine the role of case studies as evidence for developing new policy or making changes to existing programs and initiatives in the current Canadian evaluation practice and decision-making context.

Table 1
Diversity of Use of Case Studies in JRI Federal Government Evaluation Projects

Health
Child and family services
Child and youth physical activity
Healing and treatment centre services
Health transition integration and adaptation
Maternal and child/prenatal services
Mental wellness and/or addictions
Tobacco cessation and prevention
Responsible gambling
Social assistance and addiction services
Suicide prevention
Social welfare and social justice programs
Child and family intervention and prevention services
Community-based justice programs
Family violence prevention
Housing (on- and off-reserve)
Residential school resolution
Urban Aboriginal strategies
Education
Early childhood development
Elementary and secondary school
Post-secondary school
Transitional supports for new urban students

This article presents a discussion of how case studies are, have been, and could be used as part of an evaluation methodology for First Nations. It shares the perspectives of a small sample of First Nations and federal government evaluation researchers, and our perspective as an Aboriginal owned and operated program evaluation firm. We conducted interviews to explore how our case study research was being used by our two stakeholders, the funder and the program implementation authority. The main question steering our investigation explored the utility and value of case study data for government stakeholders. Equally important to learn was the extent to which evaluation findings are used by the First Nations case study sites to inform their own policy and practice. The interviews were also used to shed light on general best practices for case study evaluation methodology. Finally, we look at some examples of how case study data have been translated into policy-level change within the Canadian context. In analyzing and discussing our research findings, this article also integrates principles and best practices that we have developed over several years of leading case studies within Indigenous contexts.

LITERATURE REVIEW

The case study method experienced resurgence in the 1980s and became increasingly recognized and used as a tool for research and evaluations. The decade leading up to the 21st century produced an “increased use and diversification of case study tools [and an] elaboration of the method” (Yin, 1997, p. 189). Whole texts about the use of the case study for professions such as public administration (Agranoff & Radin, 1991) and social work (Rubin & Babbie, 1993) firmly incorporated case study research into those fields. Our experience in the past decade conducting evaluation studies with the Canadian Aboriginal community for the Canadian government shows a continuity of the upward trend in the use of case studies, despite a lack of literature promoting or describing such activities.

As an evaluation tool, case studies facilitate the “exploration of a phenomenon within its context using a variety of data sources” (Baxter and Jack, 2008, p. 544). They allow the investigation of complex social units consisting of multiple, potentially important, variables (Merriam, 2009). Although case studies provide a subjective picture of the truth, they do not reject outright the notion of objectivity (Crabtree & Miller, 1999, p. 10). They allow participants to tell their stories and describe their views of reality, thus allowing the researcher to better

understand the participants' actions (Lather, 1992; Robottom & Hart, 1993). First Nation people, families, and communities favour their traditional ways of storytelling to share and transmit knowledge. As such, case studies and stories are an important research tool for evaluating programs in these communities. Stories offer researchers a high level of knowledge about programs and practices in a much simpler format.

Two key approaches to the case study methodology are seen in the literature, one proposed by Robert Stake (1995) and the second by Robert Yin (2003). Yin (2003) identifies three specific types of case studies: *Exploratory*, *Explanatory*, and *Descriptive*, according to what phase of theory building they are used at. Stake (1995) differentiates case studies depending on the design and purpose of the case study under the labels *Intrinsic*, *Instrumental*, and *Collective*. From these, program managers can generate evidence for new policies or program changes. According to Sharan Merriam in *Qualitative Research: A Guide to Design and Implementation* (2009), program managers can either learn vicariously from the researcher's narrative description (Stake, 2005) or use the case as "a vivid portrait of excellent prototypes" to transfer into or evaluate their own program (Eisner, 1991; Erickson, 1986). It is the reader, not the researcher, who determines what can apply to his or her context.

Merriam (2009) also describes the strengths and limitations of case studies. Their rich and real-life accounts of phenomena provide insight that can be used as tentative hypotheses to explain those phenomena. As such, she notes their appeal in applied fields of study such as education, social work, administration, and health, as well as in practices that help advance knowledge such as evaluations of processes, programs, problems, and policies. However, the issue of generalizability is large, as there is often only one case (or at best a few cases) studied. Case studies are generally more expensive and take longer to conduct. The knowledge produced is particularly vulnerable to selection bias, reporting bias, and recall bias and thus affects the validity and reliability of the results. In response to these criticisms, Stake (2005, p. 455) explained that knowledge transfer for case studies is inherently different: a researcher "will, like others, pass along to readers some of their personal meanings of events and relationships—and fail to pass along others. They know that the reader, too, will add and subtract, invent and shape—reconstructing the knowledge in ways that leave it ... more likely to be personally useful."

METHODS

To select interviewees for our research, we invited clients and First Nations contacts from eight evaluation projects we had undertaken between 2010 and 2011. These projects had an average of 5 case studies each and involved interviews with both government clients and First Nations-based program staff or participants.

First Nations that had participated in case studies led by our evaluation firm were invited to respond to our survey. Out of the 15 First Nations invited, 6 completed our surveys during the data collection period. The interviewees were located across the country and included the Yukon. Each interview lasted about 15–20 minutes.

A second set of interviews was conducted with federal government personnel involved in the 8 evaluation projects, with respondents for each project identified through a snowball selection method. Out of 8 individuals who were initially contacted, 6 were interviewed, 2 felt that they were not qualified to speak on the topic, and 1 of the latter referred us to a third-party consultant they had worked with ($n = 7$). The 6 individuals who were interviewed represented a range of roles: a director general, an evaluation director, a program director, an evaluation manager, a program analyst, and a policy analyst. The departments included Health Canada, Justice Canada, Aboriginal Affairs and Northern Development Canada (AANDC), and Corrections Canada. Each of these interviews lasted approximately 30–45 minutes.

Research participants were asked about their perceptions of the utility and value of our case studies for their purposes, and on general best practices for case study evaluation methodology. Data were gathered through a telephone-administered survey, although two respondents completed the survey on their own and submitted it in electronic format. All interviews were carried out between August 1, 2011 and October 30, 2011. The interviews conformed to generally accepted ethical standards for on-the-ground research. Researchers obtained the informed consent from participants to be interviewed and for their opinions to be shared within academic circles. Quotes were cited and names were listed as additional resources only if allowed by the respondent. For example, one respondent requested their comments be shared to reflect their department's support for strengthening the field of Aboriginal program evaluations.

Because there were a relatively small number of interviews, data analysis was done without the help of proprietary software. Interview data were coded into several topic areas, and a matrix to collate the data was created. Each question was analyzed on its own, across all 13 interviews. If a topic area overlapped across questions, these questions were analyzed together under *higher-level themes*.

Generally speaking, comments and opinions were given more weight in this report if they were expressed by more than one interviewee. However, some respondents shared unique or important insights into a phenomenon, or elevated topic areas into higher-level themes. These have also been included in the discussion here. The interview notes and a draft of the report were shared with each participant for feedback or changes. This article shares our research findings and, using the data and our extensive Aboriginal evaluations experience, presents a discussion on the value and best practices for conducting case studies in Aboriginal contexts.

FINDINGS

We asked the six First Nation interviewees about their experiences with the JRI evaluations they had participated in, and how they would like future case studies to be carried out in their communities. We found that the norm that respondents had previously experienced under federal programming had been external evaluators conducting an “in and out” data collection operation, where the evaluator was a third party not from the region, was accountable to the government, withheld data collected, and did not conduct activities post-visit. The First Nations respondents instead described a preferred participatory research process that included a *reciprocal appreciation* of engaging within two-way exchange whereby each gains an in-depth understanding. This knowledge was sought—not by all, but by some—at each stage of the project, including problem definition/issue selection, research approach and design, conducting research, interpreting the results, and determining how the results should be used for action. However, respondents warned that the “ideal” form of participatory research was not always reasonable. True participatory evaluation was described as requiring financial supports for staff who would need to take time away from their duties to work on evaluation tasks, such as learning the principles and design of evaluation, testing tools, entering performance measurement data, and so on. Time away from client service provision was described as a considerable concern for case study program staff, where staff are

typically overworked and struggling to keep up with client needs and required service provision. Respondents did see value in case study approaches that gave back to the community by sharing evaluation results and that were not too onerous for the community involved in the study. Rather than simply sharing the interview notes with each specific respondent, a method we have found to be effective shares the draft case study report with, for example, the program manager, to gain his/her input into whether we had made any errors or omissions and to ensure our client receives a more valuable product in the end. We have also found it is very helpful to share the draft report with all respondents within a specific case study; for those program clients who also were interested in providing this type of review, it was included in an extension of the data collection phase and another remuneration payment was provided. The key step of sharing the raw interview notes and the final draft report with respondents provides for that *reciprocal appreciation* and demonstrates honour to Ownership, Control, Access, and Possession (OCAP) principles, where the respondents possess all case study data in the end.

First Nations respondents also indicated that the storytelling formats were favoured as a way of sharing information. Storytelling is an essential part of First Nation learning and communication styles (for example, see Lanigan, 1998). In fact, quantitative data-gathering methods are shunned within the communities. The main concern behind the use of quantitative tools is that these lack the ability to measure individual experiences, such as the individual in context of the self, family, First Nation, and national perspectives.

We also canvassed federal government evaluation specialists for their perspectives on case studies. All respondents in this survey sample favoured case studies. Case studies were considered particularly valuable assets to other evaluation inquiry because case studies gathered in-depth information from multiple sources and utilized multiple methods of data collection. It was also expressed that case studies could drill down in areas that were not conducive to a program cluster approach of inquiry, especially since programs were often verticalized and isolated from each other and required a more horizontally integrated evaluation.

We asked federal government evaluation specialists about the space for case studies in federal program evaluation policies. As it stands, the Treasury Board evaluation policy (Treasury Board of Canada Secretariat, 2009) stipulates an evaluation every five years, regard-

less of any renewal of authorities. The minimal evaluation guidelines do not preclude additional methods such as case studies. In fact, some respondents encouraged adding a case study approach to the recommended cluster evaluation, as only that could capture the differences in the results of potentially diverse programs. Indeed, case studies often suit the needs of evaluations better than other participant observation methods because they can incorporate analysis of both qualitative and quantitative evidence, and can be used to monitor and assess both the program's intervention and implementation processes (Yin, 1992).

In response to this policy, one of our respondents commented:

Don't sacrifice the robustness of evaluation that you can get by combining case studies with other sources of data just for the sake of expediency. (Evaluation Director, Federal Government)

Some departments, such as Aboriginal Affairs and Northern Development Canada (AANDC), use a national advisory committee that includes several First Nation organization representatives as well as program planning and implementation staff. Such committees are involved from the start of the case studies and partake fully in the reciprocal appreciation relationships described above. Fetterman and Wandersman (2005, p. 1) describe community inclusion and participation in evaluations as fostering self-determination. In fact, this inclusionary approach is one of the only means of ensuring that our "in and out" case study enables a First Nations representation in the decision-making processes, as well as providing a richer understanding of the context of the case study from an enhanced interpretation of results.

Some interviewees reported policy impacts resulting from evaluations containing case studies. A few evaluations had immediate results, such as influencing the decision to continue funding, as well as considerations for future pilot studies and program changes. However, there was some disagreement about whether the findings could be attributed to the case study methodology. Generally speaking, interviewees noted that some government departments have reservations about the scientific credibility of case study research, while the political climate and other circumstances have led to the improved credibility of specific case studies.

DISCUSSION

This section draws on the results of our interviews in the context of existing literature and our extensive experience conducting evaluations in Aboriginal settings for the past 18 years. We first look at the value of the case study methodology in conducting evaluations in Aboriginal contexts. Next, we identify some best practices to improve the utility of case studies in informing programs and policies and discuss in detail three higher-level themes to increase the value of case studies for the First Nations that participate in them. Finally, we look at examples and challenges of translating case study data into policy-level change within the Canadian context.

The Value of Case Studies in Aboriginal Evaluation Projects

Case studies are considered best for capturing results of programs that are community-driven and designed. For example, case studies can demonstrate how one policy can be implemented in multiple ways by looking at several community applications of the model. Also, case studies provide details of a specific implementation that other methods could not. As one of our respondents suggested,

A good case study will give you a 360[-degree] look. The bias will shine through case studies that only spoke to those who had a vested interest in terms of the livelihood and continuation of the program. (Program Director, Federal Government)

Case studies were also seen as able to confirm and reinforce findings from multiple lines of evidence under one evaluation scope. For example, case studies provided a local perspective and enhanced an otherwise national focus by providing concrete examples of how indicators of success and challenges play out on the ground. They identified important gaps, challenges, and successes that broader, clustered program goals and objectives could have overlooked. Case studies also enable a data collection process that provides greater detail than what could be known through a national or regional lens alone. Case studies, for example, can distinguish between impacts that might be subject to differences based on the length of the intervention and can also shed light on the advantages and rationale behind program models that are locally customized versus system-wide applications of interventions.

Table 2
Some Practices to Increase the Utility and Credibility of Case Study Research from Respondents

<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Collaborative planning with Aboriginal national or regional partners• Aboriginal-focused methodologies leading to rich evidence that complement other methods• Providing the case study reports back to communities for their reference or learning and even use for future funding possibilities• Randomly sampling case study sites/projects, or purposefully selecting within a specific methodology• Capturing more than one alternative view, such as client and program partners and other local related service providers• Gathering data that go beyond just opinions; gathering statistical or other supplemental data• Acknowledging that case studies do lend themselves to comprehensive measurement, such as the Treasury Board foci of relevance, effectiveness, and efficiency (albeit most agree other evidence is still required)• Positioning as specific examples of how a program has contributed to achievement of outcomes with an ability to describe those specific impacts in depth

Increasing the Utility, Value, and Credibility of Case Studies

Case studies provide evidence about what to use in an initiative and what not to use. Programs like to have case studies done of what they are doing. As a research method, most everyone likes case studies, you just need to be sure the methods are strong and people are well informed about the strengths of case studies. (Strategic Policy and Research Director General, Federal Government)

There was a fair amount of discussion from the federal government representatives around what makes a case study credible, particularly in an environment where case studies are criticized for being costly and lacking rigour (e.g., House, 1982). We compiled a list of best practices for conducting case studies from these interviews, presented in Table 2.

Our interviews also revealed three overarching themes that could address the concerns of First Nations regarding time pressures and the need for evaluations to “give back” to “the studied” while at the same time meeting the evaluation requirements of federal department-funded evaluations. We present these themes as solutions for carrying out case study research on the ground, in Aboriginal set-

tings. In doing so, we also draw from our own experiences working in First Nations, as well as from other case studies we conducted in Aboriginal evaluation projects.

Culturally Adept Evaluators

The first solution is to ensure the cultural adeptness of the research team with respect to how they introduce the case study approach and how they carry out the interview process. In response to our survey question asking how our case study approach was perceived, one respondent noted:

The youth were comfortable and the way the research was captured was very valuable. It took into account different learning styles. It allowed them to be heard and they did not feel exposed because instead they felt validated. It was excellent for us since the process enhanced our relationship with the youth instead of hampering it. The tools used enabled the youth to reach a place of comfort in the process. The research came to them [in their normal youth group meeting] and they did not have to come to us [as is normal in interview formats where they only participate for the honorarium]. By utilizing an Aboriginal process and participating in the circle and the smudging, the youth were able to share from their hearts. (First Nation representative)

When studies are designed and the tools implemented by experienced and culturally adept individuals/teams, a significant amount of ease is brought to First Nations. The right people to carry out case studies in First Nations are those who convey a cultural understanding through their spoken form of the use of the language as well as their linguistic vocabulary, and who are experienced with the cultural landscape of the reservation system and the patterns within and between reserves. This is critical when introducing the case study process, for example when booking the site visit on the telephone. It is critical that “accessible” language is used in all communications, and this includes a letter of introduction as well as a copy of the questions that will be asked. Letters of introduction need to focus on how the case study will be conducted, why the information is important, how it will benefit Canadians—in particular First Nations peoples—and the ways in which the knowledge from the case study will be shared, in particular its application within Canadian policies.

Culturally adept evaluators will employ communication styles that are normally practiced and well received in First Nations. One of our former clients, in response to our request for comments on the case study methodology we had employed in an evaluation, commented:

The case studies supporting the evaluation of [Program A] were considered to be particularly successful due to the culturally relevant methodology used, and the richness of findings that resulted from interviews and group sessions. These findings on relevance and effectiveness contributed to the overall evaluation of the Strategy. (Evaluation Analyst, Federal Government)

Cultural competence also helps identify the right occasions and attitude for conducting case studies. For example, our respondents reported that case studies that focus on the planning, preparation, or implementation of phases of programs are valuable communication opportunities. Interactions should also seek to share “from the heart,” or extend “a heartfelt caring.” At the same time, researchers should acknowledge that they are in no way solving any problems, nor are they being asked to. The primary role of researchers is to share, such as sharing traditional teachings and traditional models in a manner that encourages reflection without causing anxiety. Evaluation participants need to engage in the knowledge exchange process on their own terms, within a framework that is familiar to them. This participatory approach is usually preferred to a framework that simply employs an extractive survey tool and approach. Questionnaires and other quantitative data collection methods are shunned in favour of storytelling formats. Gestures, eye movements, tone, flexibility, grace, dress code, and level of comfort now become important elements of communicating effectively in a First Nations setting. Finally, culturally adept evaluators know how to involve Elders and leaders in the study and how to show respect, hold, and report on that information.

Giving Back: Sharing Evaluation Results with Communities

There is a very strong perception among most of the First Nations respondents that reports are merely shelved, or that access to reports is limited, that no effort to disseminate a report or its major findings are made, and that there is a general lack of willingness to bring the results back to the respective communities. This is a major concern because it breeds apathy in communities when they are asked to participate in another evaluation or case study. Many of these issues

have been proven true in their experience, and Aboriginal evaluation participants perceive research as meaningless and not worth their participation and investment.

As such, the second solution we propose for making case studies more valuable to First Nations case study participants is to develop a process for sharing results. This is particularly important for case study research because First Nations bands and/or programs realize that, typically, individual case study reports are written for each case study program, and that their program's report can help them with their own performance measurement and program planning, if shared. Sharing the evaluation results would also help enhance the local capacity of programming and evaluation, potentially resulting in gains for both evaluation participants and government departments. To continue with the current practice of withholding or inadequately disseminating results can only result in increased apathy and cynicism about evaluation in First Nations.

Comprehensive and Preventative Application of Using Evaluation Results

The third solution for making case studies more valuable to, and more readily adapted by, First Nations is to apply evaluation results beyond the program and the jurisdiction, toward supporting a more integrated and preventative approach to social programs. Many evaluation participants believe that the central outcome of any social program evaluation is always the same, that "only a preventative approach can work in social programming." The roots of a lot of social challenges, the social determinants of well-being, are interconnected and upstream of the programs themselves. This wisdom has been prevalent in First Nations for a very long time, but the First Nations have not been given the tools or flexibility to implement an integrated and preventative approach. In their view, the funding priorities, programs, and evaluation methods of the federal government have not changed, and consequently there is a growing distaste for verticalized, isolated evaluations that consistently ignore the need for preventative services funding. There are some small signs that this is beginning to change, but there is a long way to go before First Nations believe that evaluations are reflecting their realities and creating value for their people. Evaluations therefore measure the overall effectiveness of programs in addressing the underlying issues inherent in First Nations settings.

Impact of Case Studies on Canadian Policy

The Space for Case Studies in Federal Evaluation Policies

How are case studies translated into policy changes? Evaluators and decision makers often employ frameworks to explain how best to use knowledge acquired in case study research to inform policy.¹ In an attempt to address doubts of our First Nations partners that their case study participation is being used to influence policy, this section examines if there is a government policy regarding the use of and knowledge translation from case studies, and whether case studies have been used to influence policy. Although there are research translation challenges with this methodology, we have also seen some recently successful policy changes utilizing case studies.

One of our respondents noted that

[the decisions to conduct] case studies are dependent on the culture within a department ... [if they] are open to innovation and changing the way they do business.
(Evaluation Director, Federal Government)

Federal government respondents clarified that case studies are not the subject of any federal government policies and that support for their application has varied. Individual opinion and enthusiasm seemed to be what was at play in determining if a department would stick to the minimum requirements of the 2009 Treasury Board evaluation framework, in which no efforts were made to undertake case studies, as another data source. Other department representatives held the opinion that the cost of case studies was so high that the potential benefits from using them did not matter enough. However, the third-party government consultant that we interviewed noted that their firm had successfully added case studies as a line of evidence to an evaluation project in the past, where one had originally not been called for in the government request for proposal.

The 2011 Miawpukek Evaluation illustrates this confusion between not supporting case studies while still allowing them (INAC, 2011; see below, under Additional Resources). The Miawpukek Evaluation holds a lot of credibility as a stand-alone piece, and the federal government had strongly supported this evaluation. However, the method employed was essentially a case study although it has never been identified as such. One of our client interviewees noted that

the same people who valued this evaluation continue to maintain that case studies can only serve as supplementary data. It would therefore seem that there is a misunderstanding as to the value and credibility that an effective case study can provide.

Policy Impacts of Case Studies

Some departments we canvassed reported policy impacts resulting from evaluations. Some case studies have had immediate results, such as influencing a decision to continue funding, or making the case for future pilot studies and program changes. An important example was the NAYSPS Special Study (case study) that was completed in preparation for renewal of program authorities. The budget, mandate, and timeline did not allow for a full evaluation, so the study on its own became instrumental in renewing NAYSPS. The methodology provided “a certain level of detail that brought the program focus to life” (Program Director, Federal Government). As one respondent noted:

Now, moving forward, there is a strong interest in the robust data that is possible from case studies. Special studies are reserved for a case study approach. Evaluation is reserved for a certain type of work and requirements as a review process. Case studies will be an explicit way for the department to gain an understanding. You don’t need to take a special course to understand narrative data. (Program Director, Federal Government)

Some interviewees were not so optimistic that “Special Studies” added points in favour of case studies. As the program renewal cycle did not match the evaluation cycle, what was an evaluative case study was being labelled as a Special Study, thereby diminishing the value and weight of case studies for evaluation purposes. In addition, national steering committee members were said to feel inundated by case studies and had become much more cynical of the value that case studies bring, to the point that they were questioning the value or worth of case studies (according to one respondent, Strategic Policy and Research Director General, Federal Government). A renewed rigour and standard for valuable and effective case studies is therefore in order.

NEW MINIMAL STANDARDS FOR EVALUATION

As we have seen, there is indeed a lot of value for using case studies in Aboriginal evaluation research in Canada. The primary utility is the richness of the data that case studies allow us to generate. Even critics of case study methodology have noted the advantages of such an in-depth study of a program, but there are still those who do not see its value in evaluation. To maximize the benefits of case studies in Aboriginal evaluation projects, we need to better articulate the methodology and better integrate it into evaluation methodology and policy. This will help raise the profile and the use of case studies and produce more comprehensive and useful evaluation results. Also, because the value of a case study depends a lot on the way it is done, a more open discussion and articulation of the methodology in policy and the literature will go a long way educating decision makers—both Aboriginal people and those funding evaluations. We hope that our article is a starting point for this discussion and articulation.

In our experience, when Evaluation Advisory Groups (EAGs) include the right combination of persons, they can serve to build capacity within the case study sites (Mattessich, 2012). The EAG would guide the design and conduct of the case study. Another design, not as effective but also well regarded, is the use of evaluation technical support people. These professionals work with a case study site on ongoing data collection, and the sites also receive additional funding to carry out the evaluation requirements (Lyon & Morales, 2013). This model has typically provided a set of national standards for evaluation, enabling sites to develop their own indicators, measures, and plans. This works to build capacity, but with fewer people involved in the decision making and with the sites working in isolation from other sites. This model is also more highly vulnerable to staff turnover and changes in the politicized environment in which the sites exist. On the other hand, utilizing an EAG enables data to be collected by and analyzed by a third-party evaluator. Nonetheless, evaluation is an integral part of the traditional values of Aboriginal peoples, as a second nature trait. The goals therefore need to focus on the restoration of these values, which should begin at a young age in children. Evaluation should be integrated into the education system, particularly within Aboriginal settings—this holds a synergy with the promotion of innovative thinking within the broader mainstream education system.

Certainly, a larger sample size and a more thorough cross-examination of case study methods and results could produce a more extensive list of best practices. However, we feel that our experience combined with that of our partners and clients has revealed some important recommendations for researchers and government departments working with Aboriginal peoples. We suggest that a new minimal standard of participatory research with Aboriginal peoples should include at least the following three elements.

First, our research has shown the need for national and regional fostering of a base of case-study-literate individuals connected by a network approach who are dedicated to representing the interests and perspectives of the frontline programming authority at each stage of the project—from problem definition, issue selection, and research design to the stages of conducting the research, interpreting the results, and determining how the results should be used for action. Regional EAGs could form a national body of EAG representatives; one of these individuals could also serve on a regional EAG while local EAGs could include a regional EAG representative. The goal would be to circulate knowledge and bring forward experience from national to regional to local levels, where these persons are Aboriginal.

Second, we have described the need for employing culturally relevant approaches and methods. This goes hand-in-hand with hiring culturally adept case study technicians. The research has also revealed the need for the federal government to develop a comprehensive and meaningful communication strategy with Aboriginal populations that allows for a dialogue on how to improve evaluation methods and applications among their people.

Third, there is a need to begin a larger conversation that supports good evaluation practice within Aboriginal case studies. This cannot be a prescriptive recommendation or a set of guidelines. The key is rather to support the reciprocity of Aboriginal peoples to take on their own evaluative discipline again. In no way is this article meant to suggest how to do Aboriginal evaluations. The best design, the right questions, and a good or best case study can only be realized within the context it is born, for the people, by the people, as the case study specialists (Castellano, 2004; Kawakami, Aton, Cram, Lai, & Porima, 2007; Wehipeihana, Pipi, Kennedy, & Paipa, 2013).

ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

Journals

1. *Journal of Case Studies*: provides a continual flow of effective up-to-date cases to promote excellence in case teaching. Published by the Society of Case Research, East Carolina University, Greenville, NC: <http://www.sfcr.org/jcs/>; http://sfcr.org/docs/Answers_to_Questions_about_Case_Writing.pdf
2. *Journal of the International Academy for Case Studies*: seeks to expand the boundaries of case teaching by supporting the exchange of case teaching materials. Sponsored by the International Academy for Case Studies: <http://www.alliedacademies.org/public/journals/JournalDetails.aspx?jid=16>
3. *Harvard Business Cases*: a searchable resource for Case Analysis Learning. Provided online by Harvard Business School, MA, USA: <http://hbsp.harvard.edu/product/cases>

Case Study Examples

1. INAC. (2011). Evaluation of the Miawpukek First Nation Grant Agreement, Indian and Northern Affairs Canada, Project 10013. <http://www.aadnc-aandc.gc.ca/eng/1324663777699/1327331836210>
2. McDermott, R., & Walston, S. (2012). The development of a strategic plan for Health Trust Utah. *Journal of the International Academy for Case Studies*, 18(1), 7–24.

Respondents Offering Further Advice and Support to Readers (as their positions may change, we suggest utilizing the GEDs [Government Electronic Directory Services])

1. Eric Costen, Director, Mental Health and Addictions Division, Community Programs Directorate, FNIHB, Health Canada
2. Louise Grace, Program Evaluation Analyst, Evaluation Division, Department of Justice
3. Nicole Kennedy, Director General of Strategic Policy and Research, AANDC
4. Kimberley Lavoie, former Evaluation Director, Aboriginal Affairs and Northern Development Canada, currently at Director of Public Safety Canada, Aboriginal Corrections Policy Division

NOTE

- 1 For example, the Stockholm Environment Institute (SEI) organized case study research data along two axes depending how generalizable (universalist-contextual axis) and how valid (realist-constructionist axis) the data were (SEI, 2011).

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